

# What is Culture and what is Imperialism and how does Said relate the Two in the Literary Context? (P.U. 2003)

Edward Said, a brilliant and unique amalgam of scholar, literary critic and political activist, examines the roots of imperialism in the Western culture and traces the relationship between culture and imperialism. Imperialism has always fascinated the literary writers and political thinkers as a subject. It was a major theme of nineteenth and twentieth century native and non-native novelists and poets. Different writers have different perception about the phenomenon. A lot has been written on the subject in the past but Edward's book *Culture and Imperialism* attracted everybody's attention. This book was read and discussed in all parts of the world and was hailed by reviewers and critics as a monumental work.

In the Introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward states that his previous work *Orientalism* was limited to Middle East, and in the present book he wanted to describe a more general pattern of relationship between the modern West and its overseas territories. This book, he says, is not a sequel of *Orientalism*, as it aims at something different.

According to Edward there are two types of attitudes towards culture. One that considers culture as a concept that includes refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of best that has been known and thought. The other is the aggressive, protectionist attitude viewing culture as a source of identity that differentiates between 'us and 'them', and power with which we can combat the influences of the foreign cultures. Such an attitude is opposed to liberal philosophies, as multiculturalism and hybridism, and has often lead to religious and- nationalist fundamentalism. Culture conceived in this way becomes a protective enclosure that divorces us from the everyday world.

"I have found it a challenge not to see culture in this way- that is, antiseptically quarantined from worldly affiliations, but as an extraordinary field of endeavour."

Edward Said sees the European writing on Africa, India, Ireland, Far East and other lands as part of European effort to rule distant lands. He says that Colonial and post-Colonial fiction is central to his argument. These writings present the colonised lands as 'mysterious lands' inhabited by uncivilized barbarians, who understood only the language of violence, and deserved to be ruled. This is a misrepresentation of the native people and their cultures, and needs to be redressed. Edward Said finds a connection between these narratives and the imperial process, of which they are a part. These writing ignore the important aspect of the reality- the native people and their culture.

Edward Said refers to two novels in order to explain what he had in mind: Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*. Dickens' *Great Expectations* is a primarily a story about Pip's vain attempt to become a gentleman. Early in life Pip helps a condemned convict, Abel Magwitch, who after being transported to Australia, pays back Pip with huge



sums of money through his lawyer. Magwitch reappears illegally in London after sometime. Pip does not welcome him and rejects him as an unpleasant criminal. Magwitch is unacceptable being from Australia, a penal colony designed for rehabilitation of English criminals. This is a remarkable novel, according to Said, but the focus of the narrative is London, not Australia. Dickens did not bother to discuss the plight of the convicts in Australia, from where they could never return. In Said's judgment the prohibition placed on Magwitch's return is not only penal but also imperial. These ugly criminals could not be allowed to return to England-the land of decent people.

Conrad's *Nostromo*, the second example picked up by Said, is set in a Central American Republic, independent, but dominated by outside interests because of its immense silver mines. In this novel Holroyd, the American financier tells Charles Gould, the British owner of a mine:

'We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not.

The world can't help it- and neither we can, I guess.'

This is the general thinking of the imperialists. Much of the rhetoric of 'The New World Order' with its self-assumed responsibility of civilizing the world, seems to be originated from this thinking, says Edward Said,

The problem with Conrad is that he writes as a man whose Western view of Non-Western world is so ingrained in as to blind him to other histories, other cultures and other aspirations. He could never understand that India, Africa and South Africa had lives and cultures of their own, not totally controlled by the imperialists. Conrad allows the readers to see that imperialism is a system and it should work in a proper fashion. There are certain obvious limitations of Conrad's vision. Conrad was both imperialist and anti-imperialist, progressive in rendering the corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary in ignoring the fact that Africa and South America had independent history and culture, which the imperialist violently disturbed but by which they were ultimately defeated.

All such works, says Edward Said, seem to argue that source of world's significant action and life was the West, and rest of the world was mind-deadened, having no life, history or integrity of its own. It is not that these westerners had no sympathy for the foreign cultures; their real drawback was their inability to take seriously the alternatives to imperialism. The world has changed since Conrad and Dickens due to imperialistic globalisation. Now various cultures have a closer interaction and have become interdependent. The colonisers and the colonized do not exist in separate worlds. So, one-sided versions cannot hold for long. Even those who are on the side of those fighting; for freedom from imperialists need to avoid narrow-mindedness and chauvinistic trends. One has to listen to what people are saying on other side of the fence. (This is what Seamus Heaney says in *Redress Of the Poetry*.) This, says, Said, is a positive development. One should always suspect the impressions of an exclusive consciousness. Most of the Western writers, for example, could never imagine that those 'natives' who appeared either subservient, or uncooperative were one day going to be capable of revolt.

In the last part of the Introduction to 'Culture and Imperialism' Said makes some other points about the book. The purpose of his book, he says, is so trace the relationship between culture, aesthetic forms and historical experience. His aim is not to give a catalogue of books and authors, "Instead, I



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have tried to look at what I consider to be important and essential things." My hope is that readers and critics of this book will use it to further the lines of enquiry and arguments about the historical experience of imperialism put forward in it." Moreover, he has not discussed all the empires. He has focused on three imperial powers: British, French, and American. This book is about past and present, about 'us' and 'them', he says.

Said says that the origin of current American policies can be seen in the past. All powers aspiring for global domination have done the same things. There is always the appeal to power and national interest in running the affairs of 'lesser peoples', and the same destructive zeal when the going goes rough. America made the same mistake in Vietnam and Middle East.

The worst part of the whole exercise has been the collaboration of intellectuals, artists and journalists with these practices. Said hopes that a history of imperial adventure rendered in cultural terms might serve some deterrent purpose.

Said makes it clear that the criticism on imperialism does exempt the aggrieved colonized people from criticism. The fortunes and misfortunes of nationalism, of what can be called separatism and nativism, do not always make a flattering story. Narrow and dogmatic approach to culture can be as dangerous to culture as is imperialism. Secondly, culture is not the property of the East or the West.

Edward Said, by necessity, was in a position to be objective in his approach, as he lived most part of his life in exile and had the personal experience of both the cultures. He was born in Middle East and lived as an exile in America, where he wrote this book. He sums up his position in following works.

"The last point I want to make is that this is an exile's book. Ever since I remember, I have felt that I belonged to both the Worlds, without being completely of either one or the other", He says.

#### **Source:**

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## Foreword

OF ALL THE AUTHORS to whom Edward Said gravitated constantly throughout his career as a literary critic, Joseph Conrad was, as he remarks, "like a *cantus firmus*, a steady ground bass to much that I have experienced." "No one," he writes, "could represent the fate of lostness and disorientation better than Conrad did, and no one was more ironic about the effort of trying to replace that condition with arrangements and accommodations."<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, there is a great deal in Joseph Conrad's life with which Said could identify. Both were born and lived under the dictates of foreign or colonial rule. Driven out of their native homelands, the two wrote in a language that was not their native tongue. They shared the unsettling experiences of dislocation, exile, and marginalization. Caught in the disjuncture between two worlds (the disappearing *anciens régimes* or colonial worlds from which they were displaced and the new, unfamiliar, and uncertain worlds where they would arrive and would ultimately remain), their cultural and political uprooting demanded, to echo Said, adjustments and certain "arrangements and accommodations." Their exile afforded both Said and Conrad a remarkable acuity to comprehend the diversity, variety, and particularity of human experience while being conscious of its exclusions, its silences, and its prejudices. And in many respects, the condition of exile expanded their consciousness even more broadly; in their awareness of at least two cultures, their diversity of vision "gave rise to an awareness

of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that . . . [was] contrapuntal."<sup>2</sup>

Yet the similarities of their experiences are far less important to Said as critic than the trajectory of their lives would suggest.<sup>3</sup> No other writer, he says, is so capable of conveying the "aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness."<sup>4</sup> "The overtones, the accents, the slippages, the sense of being in and out of language, being in and out of worlds, the skepticism, the radical uncertainty, the sense that you always feel that something terribly important is going on, but you cannot tell what it is (what Forster made fun of), has just gripped me more than any other writer, in some ways, like an echo chamber," he observed in an interview.<sup>5</sup>

*Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, Said's revision of his dissertation originally written under the supervision of Monroe Engel and Harry Levin at Harvard University, is "a phenomenological exploration of Conrad's consciousness." It is a sustained and rigorous examination of how Conrad's short fiction is mediated and then reinforced by his letters, which G. Jean-Aubury had edited and published in 1927, three years after Conrad's death. The examination of Conrad's letters is not, however, an effort to relate the lived realities of the writer to his work, reducing the narrative of Conrad's life to the narratives of his short fiction. Rather, Said uses the dynamic between the letters and Conrad's short fiction to investigate the conditions that express the menacing ambiguities and peculiarly unsettling overtones of his literature. If the letters represent Conrad's tormented relationship to himself—one mediated by the problem of language—they elaborate the inexplicable tensions and complex literary forces in his short fiction.

His letters (the most fascinating being those to the writer Robert Cunningham Graham) portray Conrad in an embattled self-conflict from which he is entirely incapable of deriving any meaning at all. They repeatedly express his

frustrations with the inadequacy of words, their slippages of meaning, and the overall inability of language to circumscribe or fully enclose experience in a word or phrase. He tells his friend Arthur Symonds how he is "quarrying his English" out of some "dark pit."<sup>6</sup> To Edward Garnett he describes the exigencies of writing as futile, like "lifting the world without a fulcrum."<sup>7</sup> In one letter that Said cites, Conrad writes, "I see nothing, I read nothing. It is like a sort of tomb, which would be a hell, where one must write, write, write."<sup>8</sup> For Conrad, writing happens—if it happens at all—in the presence of nothing in particular and in the absence of everything in general. The demand to "write, write, write" becomes the nearly absurd necessity to render this contradiction visible or spoken. Literary activity is essentially a process of capturing the particularity of words that disappear in a spectral opacity before they may be briefly embodied in any form at all.

The representation of the discrepancy between the subject of language and the object of writing is in essence a crisis in mimesis, whose only ironic solution is the willful exertion of various arrangements and accommodations. "If the world is a conflict of willful egoism," Said writes,

then the need for recognition is the original egoism, the root from which everything else springs. In seeking the kinship of reflective understanding however, the performer of an action inevitably is forced to reduce himself to a level below the normal limits of active human life. There is a draining of strength as the past action is sapped of all content by the reflecting present. Only the surrounding darkness remains substantially palpable. In the present the corroding power of thought and interpretation completely absorbs the actualized situation and leads to an anarchic enlargement of the self. The mute, or nearly mute, agent who wishes himself fully understood grows more simple and direct, becomes less accessible to



the complex reflecting mind. And the reflecting, enervated mind, desiring relief in action, becomes even more complex, less and less able to grasp things *as they are*.<sup>9</sup>

Said's emphasis on this phenomenological preoccupation (being condemned to meaning) and the existential predicament (being condemned to living) provides the coordinates of an antinomy (an opposition between an embattled subject and a dynamic object) that gets transposed onto the works themselves. He designates three distinct phases in Conrad's literary development: 1896 to 1913 (from his decision to become a writer to his recognition as a writer); 1914 to 1918 (the turmoil of war and the dissolution of the *anciens régimes*); and finally 1918 to 1924 (when Conrad, like Europe, underwent an uneasy reconciliation).

Once he re-coordinates Conrad in the conjunctures of these sociohistorical processes, the active interplay between the letters and the short fiction discloses patterns precisely because the antinomy strengthens Said's capacity to describe and analyze Conrad's literary procedures and narrative strategies. Thus, in Conrad's early short fiction, there is a motivated attempt to comprehend an action that, at the time of its inexplicable occurrence, intransigently resists thought.<sup>10</sup> The "ominous quiet"<sup>11</sup> that initiates such tales as "An Outpost of Progress," *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, "Youth," *Heart of Darkness*, "Tomorrow," "The Secret Sharer," and "Freya and the Seven Islands" is made all the more resonant by the stories' settings in unfamiliar and remote places. A retrospective pattern repeated in stories such as "Falk," "Lagoon," "Typhoon," "Karain," *Heart of Darkness*, and *Narcissus* in different variations unifies in all of them the idea that the discourse of the present cannot possibly enclose or circumscribe the past.<sup>12</sup> The tension between the condition of narration and the story itself often produces the strange literary phenomenon whereby "both the story and the teller recede" into

each other.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the impossibility of reflecting directly the cause of a series of fixed and particular occurrences leads only to a further search for causes and the origins of them—an infinitely interesting and meaninglessly infinite process, which can only be rendered as obscure, inscrutable, impenetrable, and intransigent.<sup>14</sup> Generally speaking, the stories record illusions, but the true meaning behind them is never supplied, except in the enigmatic form of reported speech: "the horror, the horror."

Nowhere are the implications of Said's first examination of Conrad's techniques more powerfully expressed than in his later interpretation, "Two Visions of *Heart of Darkness*," in *Culture and Imperialism*. While Conrad's novella provides an extraordinary account of the imperial attitudes of conquest and the tremendous devastation that accompanied it, what differentiates it from the works of other colonial writers of the late nineteenth century is that Conrad does not provide a simple, directly narrated account of Marlow's search for Kurtz. He argues that *Heart of Darkness* is a "dramatization of Marlow himself."<sup>15</sup> By framing Marlow's narrative as a winding tale told to a group of business figures listening to him as they wait on the deck of the *Nellie* for the tide to turn on the Thames, Conrad stresses its contingency. Marlow's narrative is, he says, performed, "acted out," calling attention to the activity of the multiple registers involved in its telling. While his accounts are carefully staged, there are also "dislocations in the narrator's language."<sup>16</sup> Marlow is never straightforward, and he seems capable only of rendering the story more and more obscure.<sup>17</sup> The text is complicated, Said argues elsewhere, by the fact that there are nearly half a dozen "languages" or registers in it, each with its own particular set of modes of address and idioms, each contained by its own sphere of time, and each with its own angular standpoints. These distinctions, he suggests, are Conrad's way of attempting to reconcile the mimetic crisis that frustrated him throughout his career. "By disposing



and redispersing, then reassembling, language into voices," he writes, "he could stage his work as a writer."<sup>18</sup>

This literary tension disturbs the entire construction of reality in the novella, but at the same time discloses the contingency of writing as an act of sheer human will to put language into textual form. Yet in precisely that way, "Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of empire, of venerating the idea. With Conrad, then, we are in a world being made and unmade more or less at the same time."<sup>19</sup> Conrad's dramatization of the crisis of the mimetic powers of language, Said argues, shows imperialism in its historical rarity and contingency, and at the same time documents the prevailing and principal ideas that sustain it. Conrad, he writes, "permits his later readers to *imagine something other* than an Africa carved into dozens of European colonies, even if . . . he had little notion of what that Africa might be."<sup>20</sup> At the time of Conrad's writing (1898–1899) there was no other coherent and available discourse of anticolonial resistance to challenge the systematic violence that Europe perpetrated at an enormous human cost in Africa and elsewhere. Yet it is crucial to emphasize Said's remark that Conrad provides the conditions for an "imagined" and alternative consciousness while preserving the text's autonomy as a work of art. Only after Said shifts from the elucidation of the text's particular elements involved in the dramatization of Marlow's narrative does he adduce that *Heart of Darkness* provides the literary conditions of possibility for *imagining* another space or geography that is not subjected to imperial domination and conquest.

The working through of this technique has rather significant implications for Said's approach as a whole because the problems Conrad raises entail the radical possibility of representing and knowing the world in nondominating and nonconcoercive ways—essentially the main aim and overriding intention

of Said's *oeuvre*. This observation permits us to see the contours of his project and the dialectics of its overall critical drive within the larger scope of his literary and cultural theory and criticism: from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) to *Orientalism* (1978) to the last work published during his life, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2003).

Conrad's radical view of language is an occasion for critical explication. It is the subject of a sustained focus, multiple reconsiderations,<sup>21</sup> and various theoretical turns and subsequently becomes the object of Said's own restless questioning and skepticism. He arguably first discovers this skepticism in his early reading of Conrad's letters, but whatever its source, the subject of Conrad's literature gripped him throughout his life. Conrad's literary techniques and the problems they posed led Said to the works of Nietzsche and Foucault. What is crucial, however, is that Conrad's preoccupation with the mimetic powers of language and the willful activity of writing becomes a critical element in *Orientalism*.

*Orientalism* is informed by Said's engagement with Conrad's radical view of language. "The Orient was a *word* [emphasis mine]," Said writes, "which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations, and connotations. . . . These did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the *word*," enabling the "Orient" to become the object of Western discourse.<sup>22</sup> "By showing that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention,"<sup>23</sup> Conrad anticipates Said's Nietzschean claim that the "Orient" becomes "a will . . . not only to understand what [was] non-European, but also to control and manipulate what was manifestly different."<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, to whom he compares Conrad,<sup>25</sup> asks:

What is truth? But a mobile host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, the sum of all human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified,



transferred, and embellished, and which after long usage, seem to people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have been worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins that have lost their embossing and now are considered metal and no longer as coins.<sup>26</sup>

To understand human relationships and the rhetorical techniques by which they have been consolidated requires us, as Said observes, to displace words that stand in for existence and for the uneven relations between human beings. Such an interpretation demands the invention of new idioms activated by a memory of the realities silenced and buried in language.<sup>27</sup> In the "space of words,"<sup>28</sup> a critically aware knowledge of the multiple interactions of cultures and traditions can establish the conditions for liberation and, most important, an awareness of imagined alternatives that may, as this and his other books show, be discovered in literature.

Andrew N. Rubin

## Notes

1. Edward W. Said, "Between Worlds," *London Review of Books* 20, no. 9 (May 7, 1998): 3.
2. Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.
3. Said's engagement with Conrad's exile developed more fully several years after *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Autobiography*. In an interview he said, "The whole question of exile and language in Conrad really came to a climax in 1972 when I went to Poland for the first time for a conference on Conrad at Polish Academy of Science. People such as Ian Watt were there, so was Thomas Moser—many people whom I had read, but whom I had never met. It was shortly after the end of Gomułka's rule. The situation was very repressive. Immersed in a world I

had no idea about, I found myself speaking about Conrad to a Polish audience that did not necessarily understand what I was talking about. It was a very strange experience. The fact that the experience did not settle into some kind of easy pattern has haunted me ever since. After that, I pressed on with Conrad, and Conrad always seems to come back [to me] in one way or another." Interview with author, July 16, 1999.

4. Said, "Between Worlds," 3.
5. Edward W. Said, *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 421.
6. Qtd. in Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 55.
7. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 54.
8. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 51.
9. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
10. *Ibid.*, 88.
11. *Ibid.*, 92.
12. *Ibid.*, 92.
13. *Ibid.*, 95.
14. *Ibid.*, 95.
15. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 23.
16. *Ibid.*, 29.
17. *Ibid.*, 29.
18. Edward W. Said, "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.
19. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 26.
21. See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative," *Noel* (Winter 1974); Edward W. Said, "Conrad and Nietzsche," *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Macmillan, 1976); Edward W. Said, "Two Visions of Heart of Darkness," *Culture and Imperialism*, 19–43.
22. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 203.
23. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.
24. Said, *Orientalism*, 12.
25. Said, "Conrad and Nietzsche," 70–82.
26. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, trans. Daniel Breazale (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 117. Said cites most of this quotation from Nietzsche in *Orientalism* (203), but he uses



translation, which is slightly different than Breazeale's, from which I quote here.

37. Edward W. Said, "Identity, Authority and Freedom," *Reflections on Exile*, 400.

38. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 83.

## Preface

CONRAD'S LETTERS (now amounting to eight published volumes) provide us with an almost embarrassingly rich testimonial to the intensity and variety of his intellectual life. Yet his critics have not made much use of them. His biographers cite them only to illustrate his state of mind at a given moment, or to make an incidental point about his thinking on one or another matter. His exegetes have ignored the letters for the most part, arguing correctly that one should either develop a working relationship to the whole body of letters or leave them alone. I have undertaken the first, and more interesting, alternative because it seemed to me that if Conrad wrote of himself, of the problem of self-definition, with such sustained urgency, some of what he wrote must have had meaning for his fiction. In short, I found it difficult to believe that a man would be so uneconomical as to pour himself out in letter after letter and then not use and reformulate his insights and discoveries in his fiction.

I first studied the letters in chronological order. After a time they appeared both to form an organic whole and to fall naturally into groups that corresponded to stages in Conrad's developing sense of himself as a man and as a writer. Certain dominant themes, patterns, and images recurred, much as they do in his highly patterned fiction. In addition, I was able to discover, recorded in the letters, a curious phenomenon in Conrad's life. This was the creation of a public personality that was to camouflage his deeper and more problematic difficulties with himself and with his work. The intellectual and